

VZCZCXRO0096
PP RUEHTRO
DE RUEHTU #0039/01 0111645
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 111645Z JAN 08
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4288
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000039

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NEA/MAG (HOPKINS/HARRIS); DRL (JOHNSTONE/KLARMAN)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/25/2017
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: SO CLOSE, YET SO FAR AWAY: TUNISIAN HUMAN RIGHTS
NGO'S "CRISIS" CONTINUES

REF: A. 07 TUNIS 1004
[B](#). 07 TUNIS 1076
[C](#). 07 TUNIS 330

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#). (C) Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) President Mokhtar Trifi on January 8 told PolOffs that while discussions with GOT officials had initially left him optimistic about prospects for resolving the almost eight year-long standoff between the GOT and the LTDH, the GOT has failed to deliver on its promises to lift the GOT embargo on the LTDH headquarters. Trifi said he now believes negotiations have reached a stalemate and doubts the Government's commitment to finding a mutually agreeable solution. He added that he hoped France would pressure the GOT to resolve the LTDH situation in advance of French President Nicolas Sarkozy's planned visit to Tunisia in spring 2008. End Summary.

Background

[2](#). (C) The Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) is the Arab world's oldest human rights league. A suit filed in 2000 by dissident LTDH members (widely believed to be backed by the GOT) culminated in a 2006 court decision that virtually suspended all LTDH activities (Ref C). Indeed, there are two contradictory court decisions pertaining to the LTDH. One decision bans the LTDH from all activities other than preparing for a new Congress, and the other bans the LTDH from holding its Congress (Ref B). The two sides of the dispute differ on several points, including the political independence of the LTDH, the circumstances under which its 2000 Congress was held, and the post-Congress consolidation of LTDH chapters. (See Refs A and B.) In a January 8 meeting, LTDH President Mokhtar Trifi told A/DCM and PolOff that he met with Moncer Rouissi, President of the Higher Commission for Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties (a governmental organization), half a dozen times in 2007 in pursuit of a resolution to what is popularly referred to as the "LTDH crisis."

Almost, But Not Quite

[3](#). (C) Following several promising meetings with Rouissi in June 2007, Trifi said communication abruptly halted and he did not hear from Rouissi again until December 2007.

According to Trifi, renewed negotiations with Rouissi in December led to an agreement that the "embargo" on the LTDH's national and regional offices would be lifted, allowing LTDH chapters to meet freely. When A/DCM asked for clarification of Trifi's use of "embargo," Trifi indicated that he views the reversal of the court decisions against the LTDH as incidental or even unnecessary as long as the GOT makes a political decision allowing the LTDH to function. The fact that Rouissi, the head of a GOT organization, has been negotiating with Trifi seems to bear out Trifi's conclusion that a political, not judicial, decision is needed to end the LTDH "crisis."

¶4. (C) Having reached a preliminary understanding with Rouissi, Trifi managed to hold an unhindered LTDH meeting, led by an international NGO expert, and reception (attended by EmbOff) on December 15. A subsequent attempt to hold a meeting with regional LTDH officials at the national headquarters was blocked by plainclothes policemen. Trifi told EmbOffs that following the disrupted meeting, he called Rouissi, who backtracked from their earlier agreement and said that only the LTDH headquarters could resume activity. When LTDH chapter presidents attempted to attend a meeting at their national office a few days before Trifi's meeting with PolOffs, however, they were politely but firmly told by plainclothes policemen that they did not have permission to meet. Trifi convinced one of the police officers to call his supervisor, who confirmed that the police had not received new orders concerning the LTDH's ability to meet. (Comment: PolOffs observed several plainclothes policemen outside the LTDH national office, but they were not prevented from entering the building. End Comment.) Trifi called Rouissi after the second aborted meeting January 6, but as of January 8 had not yet heard back.

TUNIS 00000039 002 OF 002

Outstanding Issues

¶5. (C) According to Trifi, in his latest discussions with Rouissi he insisted that LTDH chapters be allowed to meet and discuss the GOT-proposed "settlement." Buy-in by regional chapters, Trifi argued, is essential and he refuses to impose a pre-arranged solution on his organization. As long as the police keep blocking LTDH meetings, however, that can't happen. Unless local chapters agree to the principles of any settlement, Trifi will continue to refuse to discuss major organizational issues such as when a new LTDH Congress can be held and the structuring (or re-structuring) of LTDH chapters. Trifi said that the LTDH has been prepared to hold a new Congress since 2005, but has been prevented by the GOT from doing so. The core issue, opined Trifi, is that the GOT is unable or unwilling to accept an independent LTDH, and Trifi does not foresee a change of heart.

¶6. (C) In the wake of the LTDH's latest difficulties in resuming normal operations, Trifi has turned to the international community for support. A French PolOff also visited the LTDH, and Trifi told EmbOffs that he had advocated raising the LTDH issue during French President Nicolas Sarkozy's planned 2008 visit to Tunisia. Trifi added that while he was cautiously optimistic that such an approach would be useful, he was also mindful that President Ben Ali told Sarkozy during his Spring 2007 trip to Tunisia that a solution was near. Trifi opined that the GOT always tells foreign diplomats that an LTDH solution is near, but in the end nothing changes after the diplomats leave.

Comment

¶7. (C) Rather than a calculated decision, it may be that the latest chapter in the LTDH saga is due to internal

conflicts within the GOT and poor inter-ministerial communication. While Rouissi may have managed to broker a preliminary agreement with the LTDH president, other factions within the GOT (such as the Ministry of the Interior, or MOI) have not supported the implementation of that agreement, which resulted in the talks themselves being derailed. Enforcing the GOT commitments regarding the LTDH's ability to gather freely and suspending the harassment of LTDH officials would require high-level instructions to the MOI. Until such directions are given, the LTDH crisis is likely to drag on.

18. (C) Meanwhile, Tunisian civil society does seem to be adapting to the situation. Political parties are playing a larger role in advocating human rights, probably in response to the vacuum left by the LTDH. Political parties, however, are not first and foremost human rights organizations. Trifi sees a need for such an organization, and hinted that he intends to try to proceed with getting the LTDH up and running again, with or without the GOT cooperation. End Comment.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>
GODEC